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ABSTRACT

Practical guidelines for new middle/junior high and secondary school principals are offered in this paper. Specific suggestions are made for becoming familiar with the school, staff and students; organizing for instruction, including hiring and master scheduling; handling administrative business functions, which include clarifying staff roles, setting a budget, and conducting maintenance and inventory; developing an evaluation plan; and developing a school vision. (LMI)

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TITLE

GUIDELINES FOR NEW PRINCIPALS

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SUMMARY

This article provides practical guidelines for new middle/junior high school or secondary school principals to use in getting off to a smooth start in the position. It offers specific suggestions for a new principal to quickly develop the knowledge base necessary to direct the management and leadership activities needed in the position. Though the guidelines are written primarily for new principals, they will also be helpful to experienced principals who are moving to a new school.

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BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

James E. Lyons joined the Educational Administration faculty at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 1979 and has served as chairman of the Educational Administration Department for six years. He has served as a secondary teacher, assistant principal, principal, and school management consultant with the Ohio Department of Education. He holds the Master of Arts degree from East Carolina University and the Doctor of Philosophy degree from The Ohio State University. Lyons' areas of specialization are: The Principalship, Organizational Development/Staff Development, Educational Leadership, and School Personnel Administration. Previous publications generally reflecting these areas of specialization have been published in the NASSP Bulletin, Educational Leadership, The Clearinghouse, National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision, Contemporary Education, The American School Board Journal, SAANYS Journal, and Journal of School Research and Information.

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GUIDELINES FOR NEW PRINCIPALS

Most new principals are elated upon receiving their appointment. And they should be, for it is an extremely important position that carries awesome responsibility. However, if a new principal basks too long in the glory of the appointment, valuable time may be lost that might be better utilized in getting off to a smooth start in the position. Moreover, with the myriad of duties that all principals have, newly appointed principals can ill afford to waste valuable time.

The guidelines that follow are offered primarily for new principals to facilitate their ability to "hit the ground running." In addition, experienced principals, particularly those moving to a new assignment, may also find these guidelines helpful.

1. Become familiar with the school.

This is undoubtedly the most important task facing a new principal. As quickly as possible, he/she should try to learn as much as possible about the school in general and its unique aspects. There is no easy way or short cut to do this. It requires commitment, time and energy. The available data base in the school is a good place to start. The new principal should review student test results, number of student failures, dropout rates, absentee rates, graduates continuing their education, etc., to determine the over-all academic performance of

students. Financial records, personnel records, student records and general correspondence should be examined. The principal should also become familiar with the school's environment and attendance areas from which students are drawn.

If there is an organized parent/teacher/student organization, efforts should be made to meet the leaders and discuss their perceptions of the school. It should be noted, however, that this group may not be fully representative of the school's parents. Assuming this is the case, the principal should attempt to meet and talk with a cross section of parents who may not have previously been actively involved in the school.

The new principal should get to know all of the key administrators in the central administration who, by virtue of their role or position, can impact upon his/her school. Many of these administrators may have control over resources that principals need. Do not assume that influence in the central office reflects the district's official organizational chart. Far too frequently, an administrative assistant or even an administrative secretary may wield enormous influence and control over resources.

2. Learn Your Staff and Students.

The new principal should, as soon as possible, get to know the student leaders in the school. Again, remember that they may not--and probably will not--be representative of the

average student in the school. Accordingly, the principal should attempt to talk with a broad cross section of students to determine their perceptions of the school.

Immediately after being appointed, a new principal should try to hold a private conference with all members of the professional staff to determine their perceptions of the school. In these conferences, the principal should primarily listen and not talk too much. The fundamental question for each staff member might be: What do you think of the school and how might it be improved? The principal must recognize that some members of the staff will probably seize this opportunity to press their pet peeves and their own agendas. The astute principal must be able to filter through these personal agendas and listen for those problems and issues that a substantial number of staff members perceive as needing attention. Not only will these conferences provide the principal valuable knowledge about the school, they will provide an opportunity for the principal to establish a personal rapport with the staff individually and collectively. This rapport is a necessary ingredient to build trust, which begins at the individual level in small increments. Also, in conjunction with these conferences, the principal should try to determine staff member's special interests, talents, strengths and aspirations.

Conferences with key staff members such as the head secretary and assistant principal(s) can reveal much about the school and the responsibilities these staff members had previously. This

information can be useful for the new principal in deciding how he/she will assign roles and responsibilities.

3. Organize for Instruction. The principal's most important day's work is when he/she employs a good teacher. Consequently, should the new principal determine that staff vacancies exist, he/she needs to give high priority to filling these positions. This is important because the better job candidates tend to get offers first.

Determine the status of the master schedule. If this has not been finalized, the new principal needs to get this done. The master schedule is the most important tool for controlling the academic program. It serves as the vehicle to determine what is taught, by whom, where and when. Next to employing teachers, making teaching assignments and scheduling students in classes is the principal's most important responsibility. It is important to see that all students expected are properly assigned to classes. Each student should be scheduled so that he/she has the maximum opportunity for academic success. The same principle should apply in making teaching assignments -- they should be assigned to provide them maximum opportunity for teaching success to the extent possible.

4. Handle Administrative/Business Functions.

The administrative/business functions are handled best when they are managed quietly and inconspicuously. Nevertheless, administration must proceed and facilitate instruction. So the principal must get the school organized administratively first. He/she must clarify staff roles, responsibilities and duties to those individuals assigned them and to the staff as a whole. Routine duties should be assigned to subordinates. For example, after inventory levels are established, an office assistant might be given the responsibility for determining when to prepare an order for the principal's signature.

The new principal must determine the school budget and how it is to be allocated. Procedures to make expenditures from the budget must be determined. Decisions must be made on the involvement of other staff members in budget decisions.

The care, cleanliness and maintenance of the school facility should be given attention. It is difficult for the public to believe that a viable, well supervised academic program can exist in an unkempt building. Consequently, if the facility is not clean and attractive, it must be put in order. Determine if the chief custodian is capable of supervising the care and maintenance of the building with limited supervision. If this individual is not capable of this, it will be a continuing problem.

Inventory levels of instructional equipment, instructional materials/ supplies and athletic equipment should be checked to determine if they are qualitatively and quantitatively sufficient to support the academic and extra-curricula programs desired. The availability of copy machines and computers for teachers use can have an enormous impact on their performance and their morale.

5. Develop a Plan for Supervision and Evaluation. Whenever there is a change in principals, the staff recognizes that there will probably be changes and develops some anxiety in anticipation of those changes. Accordingly, it is to the new principal's advantage to reduce this anxiety, to the extent possible, very early. One way to do this is to share your educational philosophy, beliefs and expectations for the school and staff fairly soon after assuming the position.

The new principal also needs to inform the staff, in an explicit manner, how they will be supervised and evaluated. If assistant principals will be involved in this, their roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined. Though district personnel policies may spell out the procedures for teacher evaluation, do not assume that most of the staff are familiar with these procedures. Nor should you assume that your predecessor complied strictly with the specified procedures. Though there will invariably be some anxiety surrounding the evaluation process, knowing what to expect will reduce some of it.

6. Develop a Vision for the School. Recent research on effective principals has shown that, unlike less effective principals, they tend to have a vision of what needs to be done to improve their schools. To formulate the vision, they have to get a clear understanding of the present state of their schools, including strengths and weaknesses. Accordingly, as soon as the new principal has gotten an over-all perspective of the school, he/she should be prepared to provide the leadership necessary to formulate a vision and subsequently a plan for improving the school. If the vision is to be accepted by the staff, students and school community, the principal must have the communication skills to articulate the vision to others. Moreover, it will be necessary for the principal to periodically reiterate the vision and see that it is revised and up-dated when needed.

Summary

Newly appointed principals have many issues and individuals vying for their attention when they assume this position. Moreover, there are many individuals and things with which they must become familiar if they are to get off to a smooth start. Knowing how to go about this in some systematic manner can save valuable time and lessen the anxiety, particularly for those individuals who are new to the principalship. Indeed, due to the current expectations for principals, a quick and smooth start may well mean the difference between success and failure.